

Panhandle Health District

8500 N. Atlas Road Hayden, Idaho 83835

www.phd1.idaho.gov

Preventing Summer Sickness takes Simple Steps

By Cynthia Taggart
Panhandle Health District

Ah, it's summer and the beach, bare feet and barbecues are the agenda for the day. Pack up the towels, pails and shovels and plenty of food. Once you find a parking place, you're not moving until you head home at the end of the day.

Unless, of course, someone in your family gets sick. That's happened occasionally over the years and you've never known the cause. Was it the water or the food? Was it the heat? Maybe it was a bug bite.

Nothing wrecks summer fun faster than illness. But much of what causes summer illness is preventable.

"Be aware of what's out there, but don't be scared," says Dave Hylsky, a Panhandle Health District epidemiologist.

Contaminated food and water and mosquitoes carrying West Nile Virus have the potential to wreck plenty of summers this year. Mosquitoes carrying West Nile virus already have been found in the southeastern part of the state. Tests on mosquitoes in the five northern counties are negative so far for West Nile virus.

Infected mosquitoes spread the virus through their bites. It's not contagious and many people won't develop symptoms. But the virus will cause miserable flu-like symptoms in some people and put others in the hospital with possible tremors, convulsions and worse.

Last year, 996 human cases of West Nile virus were reported in Idaho. All but two cases were in the southeastern part of the state. The virus' east-to-west travel pattern across the country suggests that it's headed toward northern Idaho and Washington. There are ways to prepare for its arrival.

Preventing mosquito bites is the best protection from the virus. Emptying standing water eliminates mosquito breeding grounds. People out in the early morning and evening when mosquitoes are most active should wear long pants and long sleeved-shirts and spray clothing and exposed skin with repellent with DEET or Picaridin. Mosquito trapping devices with attractant should be placed in areas away from people.

There is no West Nile virus vaccine for people yet, but there is an annual vaccine for horses.

Contaminated food and water are trouble year round, but they grow into bigger problems in summer heat. Bacteria multiply in the heat. People flock to the lakes and pools to cool off and play. People cook outside at barbecues, picnics and at campsites where proper refrigeration isn't available.

"The levels of cryptosporidiosis and giardia are higher in the summer," Hylsky says. "Try to avoid drinking surface water."

Cryptosporidiosis and giardia are infections from parasites in waste. Few lakes, rivers and creeks are free of animal waste, and the level of human waste increases in the summer as the number of people in the lakes increases. Parasites in the water from bird droppings cause swimmer's itch, a rash that can develop into sores and require a doctor's attention.

"When you swim in natural water, towel off as soon as you get out and shower to avoid swimmer's itch," Hylsky says.

Washing hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer, particularly after using the toilet or changing a diaper, helps protect people from ingesting and spreading parasites. Babies should wear clean diapers in the lakes and pools and no one battling diarrhea should swim around other people.

Hylsky recommends that backpackers carry giardia filters that clean water for drinking or cooking. Anyone without a filter using natural water for drinking or cooking should boil it hard for at least one minute.

Food presents a potential bacteria problem in the summer heat. Perishable food such as meats and many salads stay healthy in temperatures below 41 degrees. People taking food to cook and eat away from home should use insulated coolers packed with several inches of ice or ice packs. Coolers should stay out of the sun.

Cross-contamination is a prime cause of food-borne illness. When raw meat juices come in contact with ready-to-eat food, for example when a person removes raw hamburgers from a plate to place them on the grill and then places sliced tomatoes, onion and other fresh produce on the same plate, it's cross contamination. Raw meat juices shouldn't come in contact with ready-to-eat food.

Washing dishes or at least removing them to a spot where no one will reuse them before they're washed will help prevent cross-contamination. Hands also need to be washed with soap and water before and after handling raw meat. It's a good idea to wash all produce, including thick-skinned fruits such as oranges and watermelons, in clear water to remove as much bacteria as possible.

Careful handling continues once the meat hits the grill. Meat cooks quickly outside on barbecues and over open fires and often gives the appearance that it's done when it's still undercooked inside. Hylsky advises cooking meat until the juices run clear—to 155 degrees for hamburgers.

His only other guidance for a healthy, happy summer?

“Stay hydrated, wear your sunscreen, cover your coughs and sneezes and check for ticks if you go into the woods,” Hylsky says. “Avoid handling bats with your bare hands. And, most important—wash your hands and wear your DEET.”